

EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX AND
CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

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Dedicated to the memory of Edward Schillebeeckx, OP (1914–2009)

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INTRODUCTION

The Enduring Significance and Relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx? Introducing the State of the Question in Medias Res

Lieven Boeve

Introduction: *Enduring Relevance and Significance?*

Determining the enduring significance of the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx is no simple task. The question itself seems to suggest that the continuing significance of his theology is no longer evident: could it have become – at least in principle – completely outmoded? Perhaps. I would argue that there are three reasons for this state of affairs.

(1) The *first* reason is to be located among contemporary theologians themselves. Over the years, a certain distance has established itself between the theological endeavour and work of Schillebeeckx, which took shape for the most part, in terms of structure, content and method, between 1965 and 1990. This is due primarily to the fact that the context itself has not remained static, but has evolved rather from a so-called late-modern to a postmodern culture and society, of which today's theologians are a part. Nevertheless, other theologians from times gone by, have remained relevant for later generations, albeit in a mediated fashion, via a hermeneutical interaction with their work, which takes the said historical distance seriously. So why not Schillebeeckx?

(2) The *second* reason would appear at first sight to be more complex and perhaps problematic. It seems that the late-modern manner of theologizing has lost some of its credit and that the plausibility of a theological project of engaging in critical dialogue with modernity has somehow lapsed. Indeed, from the perspective of the institutional church, it is apparent that the theological tendency that had expressed serious reservations with respect to such a dialogue with modernity has subsequently gained considerable

ground in the last decennia and is now making the decisions. Indeed, what has come to be known as the 'Communio group' appears to have survived the change of context in better shape than its rivals. It goes without saying that this has to do with the prominence of one of the leading theologians of the group – Joseph Ratzinger – and with the popularity of the work of H.U. von Balthasar. Furthermore, the group in question was reinforced by certain so-called post-liberal and postmodern theological tendencies, such as the Yale School and Radical Orthodoxy, each of which based themselves in their own way on the power and rationality of the Christian narrative itself, before turning to the relationship of Christian faith within its context. This second reason for doubting the enduring relevance of Schillebeeckx's work clearly belongs to a different order than the first. The least that can be said, however, is that every reflection on the relevance of Schillebeeckx for today's theology will be obliged to declare its position with regard to this evolution.

(3) A *third* reason for questioning the relevance of Schillebeeckx's theology for today has to do with Schillebeeckx himself. It has to be said that Schillebeeckx's theologizing was already an exercise in what Metz was to call '*Korrektivtheologie*'.¹ While Metz' own political theology criticized and revised the transcendental theology of Karl Rahner, Schillebeeckx's theology appears to have undergone its own evolution from being a neo-Thomistic – albeit one already under revision – to a late-modern, hermeneutically oriented theology. We are thus left with a question: is Schillebeeckx's theology, itself being '*Korrektivtheologie*', not subjected to the same process of correction? Especially when we account for the insight – for which we are indebted to Schillebeeckx – that all theology is in relationship to the context or situation in which it desires to understand the faith. In short, if all theology is '*Korrektivtheologie*', then Schillebeeckx's theology also requires reconsideration.

Our goal in the present contribution is to confront the question of Schillebeeckx's continuing relevance primarily from the perspective of this third question, trusting that an answer thereto will provide some indications for a response to the first and second reasons for doubting his relevance. To this end we will focus our attention on the contemporary reception of Schillebeeckx in the Low Countries.

1. Point of Departure: The Reception of Schillebeeckx in the Low Countries Reveals a Duality in His Theology

As the basis for a discussion of the enduring relevance of Schillebeeckx's thought for present-day theology I now turn my attention to the debate surrounding the varied reception of Schillebeeckx in the Low Countries,

¹ Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1977) p. 12.

especially by Erik Borgman and myself. It should be clear from the outset that I do not intend to limit the reception of Schillebeeckx's thought in Flanders and the Netherlands to this debate. Nevertheless, I have been wondering – on more than one occasion – how two theologians, formed and challenged by the same master, and in spite of the common ground between them, could ultimately arrive at such distinct theological positions; so much so that the tension between both positions would appear to be irresolvable. The search for an answer to this question has made me aware of the fact that evident variation in the reception of Schillebeeckx is most likely to have its roots in a twofold 'givenness' in his theology as such, a duality that typifies it and ultimately constitutes its vigour. At the same time, however, it also introduces a degree of tension, unevenness and even ambiguity. It is this duality that I hope to demonstrate in the present contribution and develop as a key to reading Schillebeeckx's work, not only in support of our understanding of his position, but also as the starting point for a discussion with respect to his enduring relevance. I therefore begin by briefly outlining the contours of the discussion.

a. Erik Borgman: Reading the Present-Day Religious Situation – God as a Research Programme

After the completion of his doctoral dissertation,² Erik Borgman (b. 1957), former research fellow at the Radboud University in Nijmegen and currently professor at the University of Tilburg, published four monographs, one of which was the unsurpassed first volume of his Schillebeeckx biography (1999, also translated in English).³ In the three books that followed, which were often heavily edited collections of previously published articles, Borgman positioned himself within the present-day theological landscape.⁴ In line with Schillebeeckx, Borgman describes his theology as 'cultural',⁵ a

² Erik Borgman, *Sporen van een bevrijdende God: Universitaire theologie in aansluiting op Latijnsamerikaanse bevrijdingstheologie, zwarte theologie en feministische theologie* (Kerk en theologie in context, 7; Kampen: Kok, 1990).

³ Erik Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: Een theoloog in zijn geschiedenis. Deel 1: Een katholieke cultuurtheologie (1914–1965)* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1999); English translation: *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian in His History. Volume 1: A Catholic Theology of Culture (1914–1965)* (trans. John Bowden; London/New York, NY: Continuum, 2004).

⁴ Erik Borgman, *Alexamenos aanbidt zijn God: Theologische essays voor sceptische lezers* (Zoetermeer: De Horstink, 1994); *Metamorfosen: Over religie en moderne cultuur* (Kampen: Klement, 2006); and more recently, on the reception of his appointment in Tilburg: *... want de plaats waarop je staat is heilige grond: God als onderzoeksprogramma* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2008).

⁵ Cf. Erik Borgman, 'Van cultuurtheologie naar theologie als onderdeel van de cultuur: De toekomst van het theologisch project van Edward Schillebeeckx', *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 34 (1994), pp. 335–60. On the question of continuity with Schillebeeckx: *Metamorfosen*, p. 19 and pp. 50–51.

description he further specifies as 'religious intellectual', 'not only thinking *about* religion' in and on the basis of our culture 'but also engaging anew in *religious* thinking'.⁶ Borgman's goal is the unearthing of a religious core present in human existence and in society, a core to which religious traditions refer, while allowing themselves to be relativized in doing so. He is not so interested in the *content* of religious claims but rather in the *basis upon which* such claims are made. He thus hopes to find traces of what it is that fundamentally binds human beings together (before concrete religions and religious convictions separate them). According to Borgman, theologians today can only achieve this 'not by presenting the Christian traditions and arguing in support of their enduring importance, but by reading the present situation ... as a religious situation'.⁷ Indeed, the metamorphosis our culture has undergone also leads us to understand God in a new way.⁸ Those who desire to find God, or traces of a relationship with the sacred, should reflect first and foremost on the way "religion after religion" is taking shape in our culture,⁹ how religion today is not secularized and absorbed into the world, but emerges rather from a secularized culture. This emergence is not only a consequence of our growing awareness that human beings are not their own master – or of the alienation accompanying such an awareness – but also of a metamorphosis of the religious as such, a transformation of the way in which God makes Godself known today. The metamorphosis in question is so radical that it confronts theology with the boundaries of its classical ways of thinking and speaking and calls for new ways to bear witness to God:

There are traces of God in creation and redemption ... *Something* is recognized in the good, the meaningful and the compassionate, in the horror elicited by evil, meaninglessness and indifference, and in our longing for a situation in which the reality of which we are a part speaks of goodness, meaningfulness and compassion in all its dimensions and with complete clarity.¹⁰

Borgman continues: it is this *something* that is 'confessed with religious faith when the Christian traditions refer to God as "creator"'.¹¹ It is also this same something that resonates in every religious tradition as that which bears the tradition and at the same time transcends it. It is for this reason that Borgman speaks in his most recent book of theology as 'service to

⁶ Borgman, *Metamorfosen*, p. 11.

⁷ Borgman, *Metamorfosen*, p. 23.

⁸ Cf. Erik Borgman, 'Gods gedaanteverandering: De metamorfosen van de religie en hun theologische betekenis', *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 44 (2004), pp. 45–66.

⁹ Borgman, *Metamorfosen*, p. 32.

¹⁰ Borgman, *Metamorfosen*, p. 92.

¹¹ Borgman, *Metamorfosen*, p. 92.

the world, which is of God' and describes God as a 'research programme': reading the world from 'the salvific perspective in which this world is given its due and bears witness to God as its origin, support and goal'.¹²

In a number of places, Borgman explicitly aligns himself with Edward Schillebeeckx's cultural-theological project. He introduces two elements in this regard, which he considers important. First, Schillebeeckx's theological approach is based on the intuition that 'the Catholic tradition [albeit in changed circumstances] can become surprisingly significant, precisely in confrontation with the contemporary situation and contemporary culture'.¹³ Secondly, the fact that for Schillebeeckx 'all of human culture and human knowledge ... is a *locus theologicus*' contributes to the enduring relevance of his work.¹⁴ God 'can be known only from contact with concrete everyday life', and from 'the desire for and the experiences of salvation that are alive within it'.¹⁵ Borgman particularly appreciates the notion of contrast experience and radical resistance to suffering and oppression in this regard.

In 1994, Borgman argued that Schillebeeckx had ultimately not succeeded in his plan. 'In spite of its extensive interest in human history,' he wrote, 'Schillebeeckx's theology does not penetrate to [the concrete] level of human existence. As such, he is unable to make Christian tradition, with its concrete narratives and theories, relevant at this level for contemporary readers' – something Borgman considered to be the fault of western theology as a whole during that time.¹⁶ Borgman argues that this has to do with Schillebeeckx's apparently unquestioned presupposition of church and tradition, which serves as a screen between concrete human existence and God's salvation. Schillebeeckx too easily and too frequently takes for granted that 'faith comes first, that the church and its tradition are a reality that he can analyse, exposing the openness thereof to the situation of contemporary men and women'.¹⁷ Borgman goes on to argue that Schillebeeckx is bent on establishing the continuity of the church and its tradition: they represent both the presupposition and the goal of his theology. It is here that his cultural theology encounters its limitations today. Borgman concludes the first part of his Schillebeeckx biography in programmatic terms:

Theologians need to abandon the fiction that the truth of the tradition and the authority of the church form a firm foundation on which they

¹² Borgman, ... *want de plaats*, pp. 22–23.

¹³ Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian*, p. 371; see also p. 380.

¹⁴ Borgman, 'Van cultuurtheologie naar theologie als onderdeel van de cultuur', pp. 350–51.

¹⁵ Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian*, p. 369.

¹⁶ Borgman, 'Van cultuurtheologie naar theologie als onderdeel van de cultuur', p. 358.

¹⁷ Borgman, 'Van cultuurtheologie naar theologie als onderdeel van de cultuur', p. 359.

can build further, up to and including the last remnants and traces. Theology has no other foundation than the God of salvation, whose mystery it may and must constantly decipher and clarify. If it takes that completely seriously, it will inevitably change fundamentally, time and again.¹⁸

b. *Lieven Boeve: Christian Identity in a Postmodern Context of Detraditionalization and Pluralization*

The two monographs I have published on theology and contemporary culture, have been conceived of, and to a significant degree, in dialogue with Schillebeeckx's work. In *Interrupting Tradition*, I focused my attention on the problems surrounding the persistence of the Christian tradition in the present-day European context.¹⁹ How does one live as a Christian in a context that has, for the most part, lost touch with Christianity, without abandoning dialogue with the said context? Rooted in a critical-constructive conversation with a postmodern critical awareness and its insistence on otherness and difference, I then endeavoured to understand the Christian narrative as an open narrative, able to detect unexpected opportunities to expose God's presence in the interruption of its own tradition by otherness or the other. The cultural interruption of the Christian tradition – which is no longer self-evident on account of the processes of detraditionalization – thus becomes the point of departure for a discussion of the ongoing theological interruption of the Christian tradition. In the last analysis, it is God who breaks open narratives that have closed themselves, including the Christian narrative when it locks itself up within itself.

The methodological consequences of the insight that God interrupts history are then further unfolded in my similarly titled monograph *God Interrupts History*.²⁰ In continuous dialogue and discussion with theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx and Johan Baptist Metz, but not excluding Joseph Ratzinger and John Milbank, I set out in search of a theological method that endeavours to learn from the difficulties confronting modern correlation theology today while likewise maintaining one of its basic intuitions, namely that dialogue with the context is theologically necessary and indeed inevitable. Indeed, the crisis of modern theology should not lead to the end of dialogue with the context, but rather to a revision of the nature of this dialogue, on account of the altered relationship with the

¹⁸ Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian*, p. 381.

¹⁹ Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, 30; Leuven: Peeters/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

²⁰ Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007).

context.²¹ In contrast to a secularization paradigm, ~~detraditionalization and pluralization sharpen our awareness that to be Christian implies an identity construction rooted in particular narratives and practices~~, with its own specific truth claims in a context of ~~dynamic plurality~~ and often-conflicting truth claims. A postmodern critical consciousness, moreover, warns us not to be too quick to include or exclude the truth of the other, but rather to reflect on our own truth claims in relationship to the truth claims of others. It is at this point that the concept of interruption may play a pivotal role.

In the midst of dialogue with the present-day context, 'interruption' can be made productive not only as a contextual category but also, and in line with Metz, as a theological category. As a matter of fact, this category serves to reflexively elucidate the way in which God reveals Godself in history and the way in which Christians bear witness to this reality in narratives and practices. God's interruption then constitutes the theological foundation for a continuous and radical hermeneutic of both context and tradition. Just as (and because) every concrete encounter with the other/Other is a potential *locus* for God to reveal Godself today, it is only in concrete narratives and practices that the interrupting God can be testified to in today's context. Ultimately, it is the event of Jesus Christ narrated in this tradition that constitutes both the foundation and the hermeneutical key thereto. Just as (and because) the Christian narrative is interrupted, the same narrative succeeds in bearing witness to the interruption without domesticating it. Furthermore, just as (and because) the Christian narrative is interrupted by God, Christians are called to interrupt themselves and others when their own narratives and those of others close themselves off. In this sense, 'interruption' is not only a formal, methodological notion, but also a substantial theological category, narratively signified by the same tradition it interrupts. In the last analysis, it is because interruption is such a thick theological category that it legitimates and motivates its formal and methodological use.

It may be evident that the influence of Edward Schillebeeckx is not alien to such a profoundly hermeneutical-theological approach to tradition. Schillebeeckx's theological application of Gadamer's model of the 'fusion of horizons', and his own dynamic interplay between experience and interpretation, are radicalized therein – in part under the influence of postmodern thought. Tradition becomes a living tradition when Christians experience their being-Christian in their concrete, contextually situated existence. The fact that the relationship between tradition and context is intrinsic, then, and that the context is co-constitutive for tradition, also remains normative for present-day theology.

²¹ For this and the following paragraph, see also the conclusion of my *God Interrupts History*.

This latter dimension, nevertheless, required a reassessment of the late-modern correlation theology – based on a dialogue between Christian tradition and secular culture – practiced by Schillebeeckx. Instead of a secularization-based analysis, present-day postmodern culture is better explained in terms of detraditionalization and pluralization, as a post-Christian as well as post-secular culture – a point I was able to discuss with Schillebeeckx in person in 2001:

The Christian faith is in my perspective ... no longer a mere partner of an in essence secular culture. On the contrary, it is to be found in the midst of an internally pluralized domain, where it is obliged to determine its own position in relation to others. While this task is both social and cultural, it is also (inter)subjective; and to the extent that our own identity has also become pluralized, even intra-subjective.²²

The modern presupposition of continuity between the human and the Christian is thus placed under pressure by postmodernity. Dialogue with the context today forces theology to redefine the – living – Christian tradition in a context of plurality (including religious plurality) and difference.

c. Hypothesis: A Duality in Schillebeeckx's Project Itself

As noted above, I think that the different ways in which Erik Borgman and myself receive Schillebeeckx can probably be traced to a duality in the theology of Schillebeeckx itself. I will endeavour to describe this duality in more detail by way of a hypothesis.

We can speak, on the one hand, of the 'theo-ontological Schillebeeckx', who sets considerable store by the presence of God in creation and history – without regard to our knowledge and interpretation of the said presence.²³ This creation-theological intuition constitutes the ontological support for the proposition that history and salvation history are one and the same. In its origin, this intuition stems from his Thomistic background and can be qualified premodern. In reaction to the dynamism of secularization, however, Schillebeeckx has turned it into a generally-human religious anthropology, starting from experiences of contingency and a longing for wholeness. It is this Schillebeeckx, then, who – rooted in contrast experience – critically yet constructively associates Christian faith praxis and community with modern emancipation and liberation movements. Modernity and Christianity, therefore, are not fundamental strangers,

²² Lieven Boeve, 'Schatbewaarder en spoorzoeker: het één niet zonder het ander', *Jezus, een eigentijds verhaal* (ed. Maurice Bouwens, Jacobine Geel and Frans Maas; Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), pp. 87–91 (89).

²³ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Theologie als bevrijdingskunde', *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 24 (1984), pp. 388–402 (401).

because they are both characterized by the same desire for wholeness and liberation. It is this Schillebeeckx, I would argue, who reverberates in Erik Borgman's project, even today.

At the same time, however, there is also the increasingly 'hermeneutical Schillebeeckx', who employs the hermeneutical approach with increasing intensity when he speaks of church and tradition, in the conviction that only a contextual re-translation of Christianity – rooted in the interplay of experience and interpretation – can uphold Christianity's present-day plausibility. This Schillebeeckx would appear to be intent on evolving – by analogy with the experience of Paul Ricœur – in the direction of a 'no longer essentialist' hermeneutics (without simultaneously abandoning – in the words of Ricœur – its ontological 'vehemence' and truth claim). It is this evolution that allows Schillebeeckx – in spite of its difficulty and being subject to critique – to uphold the Christian tradition and church community as the hermeneutical horizon and community of interpretation. It is this Schillebeeckx who invites us, as Christians and theologians,²⁴ by way of follow up to his 'theological understanding of faith' (anno 1983) and his 'human story of God' (anno 1989),²⁵ to establish a 'theological understanding of faith for 2010', in relation to today's (no longer late-modern) context.

2. Creation Faith and the Hermeneutics of Tradition

In this section, then, I will elaborate on both theological presumptions and try – albeit in brief – to sketch their development. First I will explore the creation-theological intuition, starting off with a presentation of Schillebeeckx's thinking on the natural and the supernatural in 1945.

²⁴ Comp. Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Het nieuwe Godsbeeld, secularisatie en politiek', *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 8 (1968), pp. 44–66 (50); English translation in: Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (trans. N.D. Smith; Theological Soundings, 5/1; London/Sydney: Sheed and Ward, 1969) pp. 167–207 (179):

I will simply take my own situation in the reality of Christian faith as the point of departure and, on the basis of this, as a believer, clear up the problem of the cultural transformation in which believers are, of course, also involved. I will examine the possibilities of an experience of God that is really integrated into the new culture and of a new concept of God that really has its roots in this culture.

²⁵ 1983: cf. the publication of Schillebeeckx's valedictory lecture in Nijmegen: Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1983); 1989: cf. *Mensen als verhaal van God* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1989); English translation: *Church: The Human Story of God* (trans. John Bowden; New York, NY: Crossroad, 1990/London: SCM, 1990).

Consequently I will then endeavour to situate his hermeneutical approach, and its less and less essentialist character.

a. Creation Faith

The 'ontological', or perhaps better 'theo-ontological Schillebeeckx', is closely bound up with the creation-theological anchoring of his theology. In *The Praxis of the Reign of God*, Philip Kennedy notes in this regard that 'The idea of creation is the oxygen and lifeblood of Edward Schillebeeckx's theology.'²⁶ While he never wrote a book on the topic (only an abundance of course material), the theme serves as a basic intuition behind his entire theological oeuvre, from his sacramentology to his Christology. It is because God created the world that God can also be observed in the contingency and finality of world and history. Kennedy – and Borgman in his biography – refer in this regard to the Thomistic foundations of this basic intuition: 'God can be spoken of, because creation exhibits the effects, so to speak, of divine activity. Put differently, by what is perceived in a created world, believers can speak of the cause of all things.'²⁷ The opposite is likewise true: human beings cannot have direct knowledge of God; such knowledge is always mediated by creation.²⁸ Schillebeeckx's creation faith, moreover, not only underpins his theological epistemology, it should also be understood in soteriological terms:²⁹ the God made manifest in salvation history is the God who created the world – and once again the reverse is true: it is because God created the world that God is salvifically present in world and history. Salvation history begins with creation. It is in line with this creation theology that Schillebeeckx takes the modern world seriously, including the processes of secularization.

This position is already evident in three early articles published in the Flemish Dominican journal *Kultuurleven* (1945) on the *Christian situation*, in which Schillebeeckx – still writing under his religious name Henricus – attempts to make room for the world, for 'the natural' in relation to 'the supernatural': 'The facts invite us to recognize that the mutilation and misunderstanding of nature also has a ruinous effect on the supernatural ... If the natural order is crippled, how can the opulence of the supernatural blossom?'³⁰ Schillebeeckx refuses to continue to see any opposition between

²⁶ Philip Kennedy, 'God and Creation', *The Praxis of the Reign of God: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* (ed. Mary Catherine Hilker and Robert J. Schreier; New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2nd edn, 2002), pp. 37–58 (37).

²⁷ Kennedy, 'God and Creation', p. 40.

²⁸ See also Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian*, pp. 374–75. Borgman makes detailed reference in this regard to the influence of the Flemish Dominican and Thomistic philosopher D. De Petter on Schillebeeckx.

²⁹ See, for example, Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian*, pp. 252–69.

³⁰ Henricus Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', *Kultuurleven* 12 (1945), pp. 82–95, 229–42, 585–611 (88).

humanity and its enthusiasm for life, on the one hand, and the life of grace that demands the sacrifice of the truly human, on the other. The flourishing of human potential in culture, 'the pursuit of self-development and cultural growth is simultaneously [within the natural order] the pursuit of God. Furthermore, in this same yearning for self-refinement, our yearning for God is most profound, most important and all-determining.'³¹ The fundamental and radical self-renunciation, which the sanctification of humanity implies, might relativize this 'self-development and cultural growth' but it does not destroy it: the supernatural life of grace gives our natural yearnings perspective and brings them to completion: 'Everything human is simply the *material* that has to be divinized and supernaturalized.'³² The natural order thus maintains its own autonomy, dealing with its own business in its own way. Inner-worldly problems require inner-worldly solutions. While grace recognizes this independence, it simultaneously integrates it and raises it above itself.³³ It is for this reason that Catholics should not be cultural pessimists, in spite of their awareness of the relativity of the natural in the light of the supernatural.³⁴ In this sense, 'earthly mysticism' is allowed to interact with 'supernatural religious mysticism'.³⁵ There can be no opposition, therefore, between the truly human and the life of grace.³⁶ The distinct perspectives of God as Creator and God as Saviour are thus combined. It is for this very reason that Catholic laity should be expected to take responsibility in culture and society. It goes without saying that the desired 'bond between the natural and the supernatural ... in this world [remains] an incomplete symphony, an evolving harmony that can be destroyed at any moment'.³⁷ From the eschatological perspective, an inner tension exists between religion and culture, which – according to Schillebeeckx – also calls cultural Christianity into question when the latter clings to earthly positions of power.

Some years later, Schillebeeckx's endeavour to create space within the existing classical theological framework for world and history, and humanity's stake therein – including the natural relationship with the divine – undergoes a transformation when he speaks of the world as a

³¹ Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', p. 231.

³² Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', p. 239.

³³ Schillebeeckx's definition of original sin is also significant in this regard: it does not paralyse our natural life energy, rather it removes its goal: the human person thus becomes so inner-worldly and autonomous that he/she 'ultimately loses his/her natural ethical-religious creaturely awareness' (Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', p. 237).

³⁴ Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', p. 603.

³⁵ Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', p. 604.

³⁶ 'Humanism is thus the other side and surplus of the supernatural exclusivism' (Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', p. 607).

³⁷ Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', p. 608.

secular reality in relation to which the Christian faith must position itself. The vertical pattern of nature and super-nature turns over to constitute a horizontal mutuality between the Christian faith and the modern context. The autonomy of the world becomes even greater, although it continues to be conceptualized from a perspective of essential continuity: the Christian faith continues to be relevant and meaningful today, precisely because there are experiences in the context that can be unlocked from within the Christian tradition as experiences of salvation. Contrast experience is given a crucial role to play at this juncture in the correlation or interrelation between faith and context.

Schillebeeckx identifies secularization as the rationalization of the world in which we live. According to Schillebeeckx in 1967, this process not only leads to an increasing loss of function with respect to the church and religion in general, but also brought a new secular world into existence side-by-side with the church.³⁸ As a cultural phenomenon, however, secularization should not be identified unequivocally with the atheistic interpretation thereof, which envisages the end of faith and religion. Schillebeeckx's ultimate goal is to render a legitimate place to secularization as a cultural phenomenon from within a Christian framework of interpretation. This is only possible when 'our secular experience of existence itself contains elements which inwardly refer to an absolute mystery. ... if our human reality *itself* contains a real reference to God, which is therefore part of our experience.'³⁹ It is in line with such experiences, therefore, that the reinterpretation of the Christian faith ought to take place. In this sense, the secular world as a hermeneutical situation does not offer a critique of religion itself, but rather of the old ways of expressing religion, while religion, for its part, offers a critique of purely atheistic interpretations of the present-day secularized experience of existence. Schillebeeckx calls at this juncture for a revaluation and rediscovery of natural theology. The fact that people ultimately believe – even prior to their association thereof with religion – that, in spite of everything, the good has more right to exist than the bad, and that life in the last analysis has meaning, leads to a religious question, 'because this trust cannot be justified when it is viewed only within the perspective of man himself taken as a whole'.⁴⁰ It is at this anthropological, pre-religious level that people make a choice for or against God:

³⁸ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Zwijgen en spreken over God in een gesecculariseerde wereld', *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 7 (1967), pp. 337–59; English translation in: Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, pp. 51–90. See also: Schillebeeckx, 'Het nieuwe Godsbeeld, secularisatie en politiek'; English translation: *God the Future of Man*, pp. 167–207.

³⁹ Schillebeeckx, 'Zwijgen en spreken', p. 347; English translation: *God the Future of Man*, p. 71.

⁴⁰ Schillebeeckx, 'Zwijgen en spreken', p. 350; English translation: *God the Future of Man*, p. 74.

The so-called proof of the existence of God which is based on the experience of contingency is therefore only the reflective justification, made afterwards, of the conviction that this unconditional trust in the gift of a meaningful human future is not an illusion, not a projection of frustrated wishful thinking, but that it has an objective basis in experienced reality – the reality in which the God who is to come manifests himself, and in a very intimate manner, as the one who is absent, but approaching nevertheless.⁴¹

The unlocking of this experience dimension with respect to God serves as the ontological basis for making God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ comprehensible for men and women today. At the same time, it motivates Christian engagement in support of a better society on theological grounds, bearing in mind that this engagement is the very place in which God's promise of salvation can and must be made manifest. Moreover, as Schillebeeckx indicated in 1968: the verification principle of the Christian faith and its eschatological hope consists precisely in discerning whether Christians 'show in practice in their lives that their hope is *capable* of changing the world now and of making our history a real history of salvation which brings well-being to all men'.⁴²

Schillebeeckx further elaborates this new insight in the same 1968 article through the notion of contrast experience and the cognitive and ethical-practical theological consequences thereof.⁴³ This notion continues to be determinative for the remainder of Schillebeeckx's theological career and serves as a point of anchor/connection between Christian faith and its context.⁴⁴ In his *Theological Testament* (1994), he states: 'I refer here

⁴¹ Schillebeeckx, 'Zwijgen en spreken', p. 350; English translation: *God the Future of Man*, p. 75.

⁴² Schillebeeckx, 'Het nieuwe Godsbeeld, secularisatie en politiek', p. 53; English translation: *God the Future of Man*, p. 182.

⁴³ For this paragraph, and for a broader reflection on Schillebeeckx's concept of experience, see my *God Interrupts History*, chapter 5; and my 'Experience according to Edward Schillebeeckx: The Driving Force of Faith and Theology', *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricoeur* (ed. Lieven Boeve and Laurence Paul Hemming; Studies in Philosophical Theology, 23; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 199–225.

⁴⁴ Cf. e.g. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Tussentijds verhaal over twee Jezusboeken* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1978) p. 65; English translation: *Interim Report on the Books Jesus & Christ* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1980/New York, NY: Crossroad, 1980) p. 55. Here Schillebeeckx uses the category of 'contrast experience' in order to point – positively – to our ineradicable expectation, persisting in the modern secular context, of a sustainable future for humanity. On the other hand, this experience witnesses – negatively – to the equally persistent distress unsettling all of us because suffering and senseless injustice continue to threaten this future for an overwhelming majority of people.

to a basic experience common to all human beings, which is thus also pre-religious and therefore accessible to all human beings.⁴⁵ The veto against all forms of suffering and injustice carries within itself a fundamental 'faith in the humanity of humanity' together with a sense of hope for a future without suffering, oppression and injustice. 'Without this hope, the indignation present as existential experience becomes inexistent, impossible in itself, meaningless and without human content. Without at least a latent positive hankering for human dignity, this human indignation is absurd.'⁴⁶ For Schillebeeckx, it is precisely this link between the modern human experience of searching for liberation and the Christian message of salvation that presents the best argument in support of the plausibility and relevance of Christian faith today, both within and with respect to secular society. Even though these experiences have to do with life's most profound meaning, however, they do not necessarily call for a religious interpretation. Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx affirms – in *Church* – that in order to understand their fundamental character, 'which so deeply affects human existence', one 'is helped ... by the word of God'. He continues: 'I say, "[one] is helped"; [and] not "give[n] a better understanding of" this experience than the agnostic explanation':

So I am talking about universally shared experiences which are fundamental to any human existence, which by the introduction of belief in God's saving presence manifest a distinctive comprehensibility which can be understood by others (even if they do not accept them), which is not present in other interpretations in which belief in God is not expressed.⁴⁷

Schillebeeckx's creation faith thus expresses itself in the course of time in the establishment of the desire for God in pre-religious, human experience. As we have said, this causes the vertical nature-super-nature pattern to evolve into a horizontal juxtaposition of faith and secular world. Reading secular experience of existence in search of God then constitutes his natural theology,⁴⁸ to which he attaches God's salvation-historical presence. At the same time, it constitutes the precondition for sustaining credibility and the plausibility of Christianity for Christians as well as non-Christians.

⁴⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament: Notarieel nog niet verleden* (Baarn: Nelissen, 1994) p. 128.

⁴⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch testament*, p. 130.

⁴⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Church*, p. 84.

⁴⁸ See in this regard also: Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Een nieuwe aarde: Een scheppingsgeloof dat niets wil verklaren', *Evolutie en scheppingsgeloof* (ed. Sjoerd L. Bonting; Baarn: Nelissen, 1978), pp. 167–76.

b. *The Hermeneutics of Tradition*

It goes without saying that Schillebeeckx's vision of the hermeneutics of tradition is not detached from what we have said thus far. The fact that God reveals Godself in the concrete mediation of history in fact transforms this tradition primarily into a testimony to the presence of God in history. The extent to which God is present today also implies that the tradition is not closed but rather open and continuing. Tradition becomes a living tradition when it succeeds in allowing people to live and practice God's presence in history in a concrete way. The epistemological and soteriological cohesion of Schillebeeckx's creation-theological intuition therefore must ultimately lead to a hermeneutics of tradition.⁴⁹

Schillebeeckx systematically addresses the problem of hermeneutics in the articles he will later include in *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism*. Not only does he there recognize the Christian hermeneutical circle between understanding and pre-understanding, but in relating the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, among others, to hermeneutics, he also explicitly initiates the ideology-critical dimension of hermeneutics and makes it praxis-oriented. He furthermore argues for a critical correlation between theology and critical social theory. The hermeneutics of tradition can no longer be understood as a theoretical re-actualization of the tradition, but must substantiate itself in orthopraxis. Theology as the understanding of faith thus becomes the critically reflexive 'self-consciousness of Christian praxis'.⁵⁰

Having illustrated and commented upon his hermeneutical-theological approach in his two Jesus volumes, his *Interim Report* offers an initial synthesis of the hermeneutical insights he had developed thus far. In concrete terms, this hermeneutics takes the form of a *critical correlation between tradition and the modern situation*, which in fact can be rightly referred to as a 'correlation between experiences'. While concrete contrast experiences help us to perceive within the Christian tradition the liberating claim of the God of salvation in a different light, the same tradition – as the interpretation history of experiences of salvation – provides perspectives that allow for this modern context of experience to be structured from a Christian point of view. The result is a contemporary Christian faith in which the current 'situation is an intrinsic element of the significance of the Christian message for us'. Schillebeeckx continues:

⁴⁹ For earlier, highly cautious attempts at tradition critique and the hermeneutics of tradition, see Schillebeeckx, 'Christelijke situatie', pp. 608–09.

⁵⁰ Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Geloofsverstaan: Interpretatie en kritiek* (Theologische Peilingen, 5; Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1972) p. 205; English translation: *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (trans. N.D. Smith; London: Sheed and Ward, 1974/New York, NY: Seabury, 1974) p. 143.

It is therefore striking that the times in which men [sic] refer to their own experiences, individual and collective, with renewed emphasis, are always times of crisis in which they experience a gap between tradition and experience instead of continuity between, e.g. the Christian tradition of experience and their contemporary experience. Of course even old experiences have power to make men question and transform; ... But even new experiences have their own productive and critical force; otherwise, a reference to 'interpretative elements' of old experiences would do no more than solidify and hold back our ongoing history.⁵¹

During his valedictory speech in 1983, Schillebeeckx preferred to speak of this hermeneutical approach as 'interrelation'.⁵² He thereby emphasized the dynamic-dialectical relationship between both poles, a dynamic that is already at work when Christians endeavour to understand their faith in the contemporary context. Because the Christian message is always passed on in particular cultures, it can never be presented in its trans-cultural core: 'Thus, there is a durable faith substance [*een blijvende geloofssubstantie*], which is time and again actualized and acclimatized in a particular culture, while we can never catch sight of that faith substance in an unhistorical or supra-cultural way.'⁵³ At the same time, this implies that the said cultural mediation also represents the precondition for the continuation of the Christian message; it has 'a positive mediating function, precisely because the trans-culturality of the Gospel can only be found in the particularity of certain cultural structures of understanding'.⁵⁴ These historical mediations therefore cannot simply be relativized in a unilateral manner, since they constitute our historically conditioned access to the Gospel. It is at this juncture that Schillebeeckx applies his theological approach to the model of 'fusion of horizons' and claims the 'fundamental identity of meaning'

⁵¹ Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report*, p. 55.

⁵² Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983*, p. 9 (compare with: *Church*, p. 36). Schillebeeckx argues at this juncture that the terminology of correlation is misleading, because authentic theologizing happens in two phases (not three) which together constitute one dynamic whole.

⁵³ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983*, p. 10. Compare with: *Church*, p. 36: 'So there is the constantly young, abiding "offer of revelation", but on each occasion this is acclimatized in a particular culture, while that offer can never be found in an unhistorical and supra-cultural form.'

⁵⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983*, p. 11. Compare with: *Church*, p. 39:

The mediation of revelation varies, depending on place, society and period, but it nevertheless comes within the interpretation of faith which is presented on each occasion. Thus any possible understanding of faith takes place on the basis of and through the medium of the human understanding of reality – distinctive to a particular culture in which the gospel is proclaimed and heard.

of the subsequent corresponding relationships between the historically situated form of tradition, on the one hand, and the socio-historical context of the day, on the other. This is why 'dogmas or confessions of faith are on the one hand irreversible', while at the same time they can 'become really irrelevant for later generations' because of their cultural-historical forms. However, 'even irrelevant dogmas continue to be theologically important. ... The Christian identity in cultural breaks or shifts is what is at stake.'⁵⁵

In his inclusion of this text in the fifth chapter of the first part of *Church*, Schillebeeckx further radicalizes his hermeneutical insights and speaks, for example, of an 'offer of revelation' instead of a 'faith substance', further emphasizing the non-objectifiable significance thereof. Likewise, the dynamic and indissoluble bond between experience and interpretation, the constitutive bond between experience and experiential tradition, reinforce his insight into the hermeneutical circle from which we are unable to extricate ourselves. At the same time, Schillebeeckx also underlines the critical-productive dynamic that is activated within this circle when experiences are given meaning on the basis of an experiential tradition, and simultaneously, as experiences of revelation, place the same tradition under pressure. Allusion to the fact that experiences of suffering and narratives of suffering enjoy cognitive priority in this dynamic because they bear witness *ex negativo* to the *humanum* desired by all, brings his hermeneutical observations into contact once again with the modern translation of his creation-theological intuition.

3. Theology after Schillebeeckx

Both the creation-theological foundation and hermeneutical-theological approach are deeply woven into Schillebeeckx's theology, providing it with its specifically late-modern profile.

As early as 1994, Borgman argued that this synthesis was subject to pressure and appeared to have lost its plausibility for many of our contemporaries: 'Experience of teaching students and interested "ordinary believers" makes it clear that young people find it difficult to access Schillebeeckx's work and that the latter appeals for the most part to people

⁵⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983*, p. 16. Compare with *Church*, pp. 43–44:

... dogma's, are on the one hand irrevocable and irreversible: ... But on the other hand, in their cultural and historical forms they can become irrelevant and meaningless ... But even dogmas which have become irrelevant with the passing of time remain theological, i.e. important ... there is Christian identity in cultural breaks and shifts, ...

older than 55.⁵⁶ The context would appear to have changed to such an extent that people have difficulty with Schillebeeckx's project, and that the next generations deal with it and draw from it in a different way. In my presentation of the twofold reception of Schillebeeckx, I have already noted that Borgman has particular difficulty with Schillebeeckx's maintenance of tradition and church, which would prevent him from pointing to concrete faith in concrete life. His theology thus gets bogged down, Borgman claims, in a 'search for the core of what it is to be Christian via an analysis of the Christian past'.⁵⁷ Schillebeeckx thus misses the opportunity to discover traces of God in new and different ways in the world today. It will come as no surprise that I do not fully share this analysis, but prefer to point to the late-modern rootedness of Schillebeeckx's theology to emphasize why its persuasiveness no longer functions today. In a context that can no longer be described as evidently Christian, in which it is difficult to accept that the experience of contingency and solidarity can function almost automatically as a sort of natural theology, any overhasty association between such experiences and Christian belief in God runs the risk of eroding the latter and transforming it into a sort of narrative reduplication of what people already know.⁵⁸ From a contemporary perspective, the problem with the reception of his theology, in my opinion, is not so much that Schillebeeckx engages in too much tradition hermeneutics, but rather not enough. It is on this particular point, however, that Schillebeeckx can also lead the way to an ever more hermeneutical hermeneutics: the Christian faith is rooted in a narrative and a common history of interpretation 'in which [- as he writes in 2001 -] the temporal and the particular are understood from a temporal and particular context'.⁵⁹ As Schillebeeckx continues: 'In the highly concrete aggregate of fragmentary, personal and collective events

⁵⁶ Borgman, 'Van cultuurtheologie naar theologie als onderdeel van de cultuur', p. 359 n. 86.

⁵⁷ Borgman, 'Van cultuurtheologie naar theologie als onderdeel van de cultuur', p. 358.

⁵⁸ In this sense we can turn Schillebeeckx's proposition from 1967 on its head: when he spoke of secularization, he wrote that the Christian faith is reduced to a 'useless' superstructure when a breach is established between the modern secular context and that said faith. The truth claims of the faith thus become a question of fideism and can no longer be taken seriously (Schillebeeckx, 'Zwijgen en spreken', p. 349; English translation: *God The Future of Man*, pp. 71-73). The opposite is the case, however, in the present day: too much continuity between faith and context transforms Christian faith into a 'useless superstructure'. At the same time, however, I would add, also discontinuity does not have the last word in the matter, although the precise mediation of the Christian salvific message still requires our reflection in a post-Christian, post-secular and pluralized context.

⁵⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Het gezag van de traditie in de theologie', *Jezus, een eigen-tijds verhaal* (ed. Maurice Bouwens, Jacobine Geel and Frans Maas; Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), pp. 76-87 (87) - with reference to Theo de Boer.

[and narratives], likewise and precisely within our present-day situation, it becomes possible to detect the profile of a liberating God.⁶⁰

Borgman's and my differing diagnosis leads to differing theological projects, in which the work of Schillebeeckx is differently received, and with consequences, as we have seen, for both of our evaluations of the enduring relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx for present-day theology. Allowing for a potential lack of nuance, I would describe this difference in theological approach as follows:

(a) Because the world is ultimately of God, Borgman searches for traces of God in the world, and it is only to the extent that tradition and community are of service in this regard that they continue to count. Indeed, the relationship is in fact the reverse: only insofar as we can demonstrate where God is manifest today, can we introduce the said tradition into the discussion. Where the transmitted tradition and community have an alienating effect, theology is faced with the task of reading reality in a new - post-secular and post-traditional - religious way. The present-day transformation of the religious to which we have referred serves then as the outcome of such a re-reading.

(b) My own point of departure is theology's task of reflecting on the experience of being Christian in a transformed context. It starts from the experience that being Christian - with legitimate variety - is a specific position in the domain of religious and other fundamental life options, which brings with it a specific hermeneutical approach to reality. Informed by the so-called 'linguistic turn', it is fundamental in this regard that our access to reality is linguistic and thus interwoven in interpretations. Insofar as this access is situated today in a dynamic, irreducible and often conflicting plurality of narratives and discourses, each narrative is likewise challenged to determine its own position in relation to difference and otherness. Naturally, whatever post-liberals may pretend, this need not imply that we are locked within our own language and experience, rather that we must bear witness to the interruption of our language and narratives in precisely linguistic terms. It is for this reason that tradition and community are crucial. That is, tradition must be understood as a process of continual recontextualizing, a living tradition; and community therefore as a concrete hermeneutical community in which theology locates itself on the basis of its own task. If we are to detect traces of God in reality, to see where God interrupts history *and* the Christian narrative, both the narrative in question and the interpreting community are important - at the same time putting pressure on both narrative and community to recontextualize when interruption takes place.

I myself would thus be inclined to link Erik Borgman's theological project to Schillebeeckx's creation-theological intuition, driven by the 20th

⁶⁰ Schillebeeckx, 'Het gezag van de traditie in de theologie', p. 87.

century endeavour to rethink the relationship between the natural and the supernatural in a world that has become increasingly alienated from both church and tradition. The theological truth claim that the world is of God would then appear to be heading towards a hermeneutic that is less and less connected to the linguistic foundations from which it ultimately emerged, precisely because of the aforementioned alienation. The generally-human religious anthropology that is claimed, as far as I am concerned, on merely theological grounds, then receives the primacy. In my own theological approach, I would explicitly locate this truth claim – i.e. the world is of God – within the particular linguistic horizon of interpretation in which it took shape. It is precisely because the Christian narrative of God's saving presence in the world makes us read the world in this way that Christians make such a claim and live from such a claim. The contemporary situation of plurality and difference in which they now find themselves then results in putting pressure on this particularity. The crucial question then is: how do we uphold and express this narratively embedded truth claim, without allowing it to become totalitarian – without allowing the Christian narrative to evolve into a hegemonic master narrative – and creating victims on account of its proclamation to the world of the same truth claim?

Schillebeeckx writes somewhere that 'profane history is salvation history, independent of our knowledge thereof'.⁶¹ For sure, this may be correct, but if there were not the narratives concerning the God who makes salvation history with us, this would probably have gone unnoticed, and most certainly would have made little difference in the praxis of our lives. For God does not reveal Godself in experience as such, but in interpreted experience. Context, history and narrative are co-constitutive for revelatory experiences.

4. *Theology Today*

In the conclusion to his *The Praxis of the Reign of God*, Robert Schreiter proposes the following four elements as characteristic of the enduring relevance of Schillebeeckx's theology. First, there is his inductive approach, which focuses on experiences and interpretation, and ascribes to the insight that God can only reveal Godself through the concrete mediation of world and history. Schreiter refers in the second instance to the narrative character of experience, both for the first disciples of Jesus as for ourselves, and the dangerous memory that lies hidden in narratives of human suffering. Thirdly, and related to the latter, he alludes to the cognitive importance of the contrast experience, including the asymmetrical structure thereof, which leads in a postmodern context to the critique of master narratives.

⁶¹ Schillebeeckx, 'Theologie als bevrijdingskunde', p. 401.

Schreiter concludes by reminding us of the primacy of Schillebeeckx's soteriology, not only in his Christology, but in his theology as a whole, including his teachings on creation. Schreiter adds that the fact that many of these insights are now widely accepted in contemporary theology is due in the first instance to the work of Schillebeeckx: 'While certain elements in his theology may come to be superseded by more recent reflection and research, these foundational elements remain.'⁶²

From my own perspective I would add the following to Schreiter's list. I would argue that an elaboration of Schillebeeckx's hermeneutical-theological line – certainly when in dialogue with the later thought of Ricœur – leads to the insight that his natural theology is a forceful *theological* reading of reality. This is not only true with respect to Schillebeeckx's earlier work, but also his later works and his creation-theological reading of secularity, including the contrast experience. The latter is no longer presumed to result in a broadly human religious anthropology, one which can serve as the basis for the plausibility and relevance of the Christian narrative, to be understood potentially by all. The question remains, however, whether the insight into the theological character of this claim ultimately disqualifies it. For Christians, who experience and substantiate the Christian narrative in their everyday lives, such disqualification does not make the claim any less true. It becomes clear, nevertheless, that the cultural plausibility of such a claim can no longer be rooted in continuity. This need not, of course, imply that dialogue with the context should be abandoned – as some anti-modern and postmodern theologians are often too pleased to insist. It is in this regard that thinkers who point – as Schreiter indicates – to radical asymmetry in the contrast experience, to the experience of difference and conflict, raise the question of justice. Such thinkers are often too quick to forget that the question of justice is also mediated through language and the asymmetry of which they speak is not discussed out of context. They all too frequently lapse with ease, like John Caputo, into patterns of 'religion without religion', 'pure religion' and 'messianity without messianism', which are then taken to be more original and claimed to underlie concrete religions.⁶³ It is precisely Schillebeeckx's (likewise creation-)theological insight that concrete experiences, narratives, history and context – and thus language – make a difference, that informs the position Christians adopt in their lives today, and can lead to the establishment of a contemporary

⁶² Robert J. Schreiter, 'Edward Schillebeeckx: His Continuing Significance', *The Praxis of the Reign of God: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* (ed. Mary Catherine Hilker and Robert J. Schreiter; New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2nd edn, 2002), pp. 185–94.

⁶³ See, e.g., the analysis in my 'Theological Truth, Particularity and Incarnation: Engaging Religious Plurality and Radical Hermeneutics', *Orthodoxy: Process and Product* (ed. Mathijs Lamberigts, Lieven Boeve and Terrence Merrigan; BETL, 227; Leuven: Peeters, 2009), pp. 323–48.

Christian open narrative that is capable of seeing where the God of creation and salvation history is revealed today. Furthermore, it also determines the conditions under which Christians can introduce this claim into dialogue with others – not as something that others should already know and share in advance, but as something that is already part of the game for Christians, something to which they wish to bear witness in dialogue and praxis, in the hope that God's engagement in history and context can become more apparent.

PART I
'GOD IS NEW EACH
MOMENT': THE QUESTION
OF GOD IN MODERNITY